

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

MICHELE MOLNAR: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Michele Monar

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: Okay so we are going to cover four main topics.

A little bit of family sort of back history, migration to Australia, that kind of thing. We are then going to cover eat, pray, and nachas, those three different topics.

So if you can start by giving me your name and when and where you were born?

Michele Molnar: My name is Michele Molnar. My maiden name is Michele Benmayer. I was born in 1964 and I was born in the Belgian Congo which is now Zaire.

Interviewer: You need to tell me a little bit about ... I guess you moved around a little bit before you come to Australia. Can you tell me a little bit about circumstances and what made you eventually settle in Australia?

Michele Molnar: My parents were born in Egypt and they were Jews in Egypt. The story goes that my father at the age of 16 was going to be conscripted into the Egyptian army. There was also a lot of unsettlement in Egypt amongst the other Arab nations and Israel so my father didn't want to go in the Egyptian army knowing that potentially Egypt and the other Arab nations were going to fight against Israel. He was sent to Italy by his parents at the age of 16. That's where he went and he studied. He eventually came to Australia probably about five years later at the age of 21-22 and landed in Melbourne. The reason he landed in Melbourne, he said to me, because he had family there.

My mother was younger than my father so she was in Egypt with her parents and they were sensing that there was also going to be war. They were really nervous being Jews in Egypt. After the Egyptian/Israel war in 1956 [the Suez Crisis], the Egyptian government gave the Jews in Egypt a pocket of time to pick up their belongings and leave so they chose to pick up their belongings and leave. They were allowed to take two bags of clothing and 20 Egyptian pounds each and then they packed their things together and left the country with that. From there they went to Italy and they were greeted by the Jewish community in Italy and they helped them make their way to Australia.

My mother landed in Sydney and was in the Eastern Suburbs. I asked her why she was in the Eastern Suburbs and she said that's where her family were so that's where they went. My parents met at Bondi Beach in 1962 and in 1963 they got married. They had my sister in 1963 at the War Memorial Hospital at Bondi Junction and after they had her in 1963, they decided they were going to go to the Belgian Congo which is in Central Africa for work and that's where I was born. Then three years later they came back and came back to Clovelly. We lived in Clovelly and in 1970 my brother was born. That is pretty much the story.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Did they mention any particular challenges that they had when they first came to Australia?

Michele Molnar: Obviously for them language was a problem. My mother landed here she was 13 years old and as much as the Egyptian Jews spoke a lot of languages I think she spoke Arab and Spanish and Greek and Italian, her English was really, really basic and so language was a big hindrance. Obviously they didn't have many finances. They only had the small amount of money they had in their pocket. They had to rebuild themselves and the Egyptian Jews were quite affluent in Egypt and when they landed in Australia they were obviously struggling. My grandmother says

that she never worked a day of her life. I think when she landed here she was 40. She never worked a day of her life and from the age of 40, she had to learn how to work. It was challenging.

Interviewer: How do you think the Jewish community has shaped this area?

Michele Molnar: This area has been shaped by every ... I believe that the Jewish community in the Eastern Suburbs has been shaped a lot ... The Eastern Suburbs has definitely been shaped by the Jewish community. There are so many different sects within the Jewish community and depending on what the immigration of that time is, that's how it gets shaped. All you have to do is look at the continental food stores, Gelato Bar, the Cafe 21 down at Double Bay so I think the Eastern Suburbs is very multicultural and that is primarily because of the Jewish community in the East.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about food that maybe you remember from your childhood and memory about eating your favourite food?

Michele Molnar: Okay. Coming from Egypt, our foods were very Mediterranean, Middle Eastern. They were full of spices. The desserts were always sugary and syrupy and sweet. I remember eating a lot of rice and beans. We didn't eat very much meat but my grandmothers and my mother were very, very good cooks. My memories, my favourite foods. They used to make what's called, the soup called molohiya. The molohiya the best way to describe it is like spinach soup but it is a green vegetable. The soup was made with this green vegetable and a lot of garlic. Whenever the women would get into the kitchen to cook molohiya they would always have to put their hair in shower caps because they used so much garlic in the soup that it went into their pores and into their hair.

When they served it, it was thick green soup that normal people wouldn't eat but it was delicious and so we would have this soup which was full of garlic and rice and that was our meal. It was beautiful, yum.

Interviewer: As long as everybody ate it.

Michele Molnar: Everybody ate it and you didn't kiss anyone afterwards you are fine.

Interviewer: Back in the early days, what did you think of typical Australian food compared to this very, very spicy and aromatic kind of Egyptian food?

Michele Molnar: My first memories of Australian foods was when I went to Waverley Public and they used to have the tuck shop, used to be a little window to the side of the playground that was adjacent to the corner store. My first memories of Australian food, my first vivid memories of Australian food was from school where I ate my first finger bun and my first cream bun. I thought they were delicious. That was also the place where I ate peanut butter and Vegemite for the first time. Australian food was always very bland compared to what I grew up with; however, my memories of those beautiful, soft, creamy cream buns were delicious. I don't think I have had one for the last 40 years.

Interviewer: That was natural cream is it?

Michele Molnar: I think it was in those days. I don't know if they knew how to make mock cream comparison to now.

Interviewer: How has the migration life of your parents influenced food in the local area?

Michele Molnar: I don't think my parents' culture has affected the foods in the Eastern Suburbs as much as other Jewish cultures. I think because it's such a Hungarian based area, it is primarily a Hungarian based area, we tend to eat a lot more Hungarian or Eastern European foods. I don't think ... Now you've got your traditional delicatessens. You've got Norton's. You've got your local delis and they are more inclined to have more Mediterranean foods but when I grew up it wasn't like that. It was different. I think you've got to go out into the suburbs, into Lidcombe and Bankstown to eat my culture food. There's not much in the East.

Interviewer: Did your parents keep a kosher?

Michele Molnar: No. My parents were not kosher. We didn't eat ham or bacon but we were not kosher.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about any special foods that you prepared or ate during family get-togethers or Jewish holidays?

Michele Molnar: The foods we'd eat, we are Sephardi and so the Sephardic culture through festivals really differs to the Ashkenazis. Primarily the foods I remember are through Passover. In Passover, we have a haroset, and a haroset is a thick jam made of grapes and dates. It is delicious. We also had a lot of oil, bread soaked in oil with cumin. At Passover the Sephardis eat rice and beans. I just remember through our culture we were always eating sweets, the thick baklava with the syrups and the nuts and fruits and that's pretty much what I remember.

Interviewer: Do you remember spending time in the kitchen with your mum and learning cooking from anyone?

Michele Molnar: I remember spending time in the kitchen with my mother and my grandmother because she lived with us. I actually didn't have a choice. I had to. It was our job. It was the female role in our house to help in the kitchen. I've got to say, I probably learnt a lot of my basic cuisine techniques from my mother but I still call her often to get her recipes. Also now that I'm older I don't want a lot of her recipes to die so I'm trying to write them down and archive them and practice them so they are as good as hers before they are lost.

Interviewer: The essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances. In this section, we would love to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions and how it shapes your identity and traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. First of all, I'd like to ask you about your religious practices compared to say your parents.

Michele Molnar: My religious practices compared to my parents are very diluted. My parents as much as they weren't orthodox Jews they were very traditional. My religious practices are we celebrate Shabbat. We do the High Holidays and that's pretty much it. I did send my children to a Jewish school in the hope that they would have more Jewishness in them but that didn't happen. I think they're more likely to follow the parents, our footsteps, than the Jewish school that they went to. I could participate more in the Jewish religion but I don't.

Interviewer: Do you attend synagogue and if you can you tell us a little bit about that?

Michele Molnar: I would like to attend synagogue more but I don't. I think my life is so busy and my kids are so demanding and I work, that to actually get home in time to attend synagogue and have a meal on the table is challenging. I find synagogue very therapeutic. I actually enjoy sitting there and praying but I suppose I enjoy it because I don't do that often. Before my kids were bar mitzvahed I decided that we needed to be part of a congregation because I thought that the rabbi needed to know who we were prior to standing up and making a sermon on my children. We were members of South Head shule for probably a period about five or six years leading up. I really enjoyed that but it is quite expensive if you don't attend.

Interviewer: Are there any traditions that you feel are very important and you are very passionate about?

Michele Molnar: I'm really passionate about Friday nights, about the Sabbath, about Shabbat. I'm passionate in giving my children and my family memories of Friday night. I really believe that that's what keeps our family together. It is not compulsory to the children; however, they all want to attend. I love to prepare Friday night and I love to cook and have the family together on Friday night. Shabbat is very important to me.

Interviewer: We will ask one more question about Jewish traditions and basically, is there anything particular your parents or grandparents have passed on to you and I suppose accordingly that you are also passing on to your children?

Michele Molnar: My parents passed on to me the importance of family and the importance of the extended family. My grandmother just passed away. She was 98 and I adored her right up to the very end. I've seen my children with their grandparents and they are very tender and pleasant when they are with them and affectionate. I can see that going on to my children.

Interviewer: That's nice. We will move to nachas. Basically every Jewish person wants some naches in their life. It can be also be seen as success in loving and giving back to the community. What does the word nachas mean to you and does that have a special significance?

Michele Molnar: I had to think about that before I came here and I actually had to look it up to make sure I knew what it meant because to me it was just something you do. When I looked it up it said it is about being proud. I'm proud because naches to me is to give. To me giving is about giving to the children. I try to spend a lot of time making sure that the next generation are okay. I see kids who require a little bit more attention and I give them my time and that's what I'm proud of.

Interviewer: What do you hope for your own children?

Michele Molnar: My own children, what do I hope? I hope my kids are happy. That's all I want for them and they are happy and they are good people.

Interviewer: What do you think your biggest achievement in life is?

Michele Molnar: My biggest achievement is definitely my children. I could not be prouder of my children. My children are successful. My children are independent. They are good people. They give and I really like them, so yes definitely my kids are my biggest success.

Interviewer: We just got really one question to wrap it up and that's whether you are involved in any activities in the wider Waverley community that also bring you naches?

Michele Molnar: In the wider? I'm not involved in anything that's established but as I said before I am involved in helping kids. Kids that require a bit of time. Kids who are unwell. Kids who have had a hard life. Kids who are suffering from illness. I do give a lot of time to kids who need.

Michele Molnar: Yeah. I brought my teddy bear and it has a very special story. I had to ring my mom last night for her to remind me what the story was. When I was born in the Belgian Congo in 1964, my mother worked in the English embassy. She wasn't expecting to fall pregnant and when she had me, she couldn't buy me anything because it was so poor. She begged an American soldier who was going to Zambia to please buy me a teddy bear. This American soldier went to Zambia and brought back this teddy bear so I could have [it]. And I still have that today and that is what was photographed.